

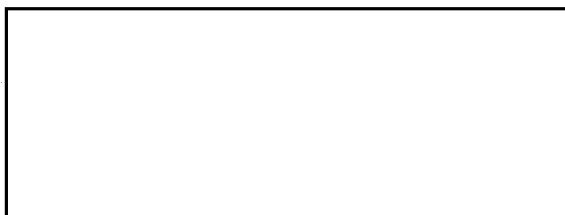
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LAOS: The Communists have proposed that discussions leading to peace talks be reopened, and the government has responded favorably.

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The full text of the Souphanouvong telegram is not yet available, but it apparently was conciliatory in tone and held out the prospect of progress in getting talks between the two sides under way. Souvanna is interpreting the Communists' new political initiative as evidence of their military failures in Laos this year, but this appears to be a reflection of his current optimism rather than a sound insight into Communist motivation.

Preliminary negotiations last year were largely concerned with procedural questions, in which both sides tried to gain the advantage before entering into substantive talks. The Communists proved fairly flexible in their tactics, generally backing away from sweeping demands for a total bombing halt as a prelude to talks and accepting a face-saving formula on the question of whether Souvanna's negotiator represented him as "prince" or as "prime minister." The preliminary talks broke down in January of this year when Souvanna rescinded his earlier agreement that the talks would be conducted in the Communist-held town of Khang Khay on the Plaine des Jarres. The whole subject went into abeyance while operation Lam Son 719 was being executed.

How seriously the Communists and the Laotian Government intend to push for talks this year and how flexible they are prepared to be in order to move the negotiating situation along should become

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clearer when Souk arrives in Vientiane--possibly in early May. The Communists' objectives presumably are still to lay the groundwork for a future settlement that will enable them to resume some participation in the Lao Government and, more immediately, to gain a bombing halt or some other diminution of the war that is to their advantage.

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